

REGIONAL CUSTOMS DIRECTORATES MANAGEMENT

Caba Ștefan

National Customs Authority Cluj Regional Directorate for Excise and Customs Operations

Căuș Vasile-Aurel

*University of Oradea Faculty of Science Department of Informatics and Mathematics
vcaus@uoradea.ro*

The management of a regional customs directorate is analyzed. A new approach of the managerial system, in the European integration context, is presented.

The customs system is one of the first "doors" to a new economic, social and cultural community. For that, the system must be adapted to European demands in a fast and efficient manner. Obviously, the methods used in management have to be improved. The role of customs system has dramatically changed and, consequently, the coordination of all activities have to change also.

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1. Introduction

The adhesion of Romania to the European Union represents a fact with major implications for every citizen. The importance of this fact is, however, differently dimension at personal level. Depending on the possibilities, responsibilities and aspirations of each one of us, the adhesion process and the adhesion itself has been looked upon showing more or less interest. Like every major process, the implications it withholds are of a nature able to bring structural and strategic modifications at all levels.

As of 2007, we are literally part of a cultural, economic and social universe, which includes differences compared to what we have meant as a country to that moment. The efforts made in the pre-adhesion process, as well as those made during the adhesion phase, represent a challenge which cannot be easily faced. To problems automatically generated by the necessity of adaptation to new requirements adds the inertia of a new system that, year after year, has been marked by the sickness of individuality built on non-loyal competition and on structures of relations which very seldom have had bounds to professionalism. These are premises which, among other facts, complicate the alignment of Romanian public institutions to the standards present in most European countries.

The European Union is not purposed as a structure which has as a main purpose helping countries stranded behind development. It is conceived as an inter-state community, in which each country must bring its contribution to assuring an economic-social stability, also maintaining of cultural, ethnical and confession diversity. All this must be achieved by obeying rules, which, for Romania, as a new member, means supplemental efforts. Perhaps the biggest problem is one of mentality, and the rational system of a nation cannot be changed during a short period of time. Therefore, the overlap of a complex gearing, mostly new, over an almost historical mentality, is probably the most difficult aspect of integration.

Begun long ago, the process of reforming public institutions as a part of adhesion efforts has been and is marked by the political handprint of decisional forums. One of the first institutions which have taken important steps toward the accommodation with the European vision was the National Authority of Customs (under its diverse names and organizational structures). Romania is presently a part of the border of the European Union, therefore the customs system must satisfy, at the highest level, the exigencies imposed. With an important role in protecting the European market and also the national market, this system must reach the level where it can fulfill the tasks it is faced with, these being not a few or unimportant.

The structures of the National Customs Authority contribute, directly or by cooperation with other institutions, to the actions of pursuit and collecting of a category of taxes and debts to the national budget, as well as to the prevention and eradication of some contravention phenomena, and so forth. It will not be insisted here on the actions which require the implication of customs entities, but it is obliged to underline some of the aspects which have been modified along with the adhesion of Romania to the European Union.

The statute of border of the European Union imposes to Romania a reorientation regarding the accent posed on different border points. If until 2007, the border points at the western border have mostly represented the central points regarding human and material placements, along with the attainment of the quality of member of the Union, the accent is transposed to the northern, eastern and southwestern borders. Thus, most of the restructuring actions regard the above stated regions. The regional excise and customs operations directorates have been forced to adopt strategies correlated with the national geographical positions in which they are placed. On one hand, some regional directorates have been forced to pay special attention to customs traffic of entrance in the European Union: on the other hand, other regional directorates had to adopt measures to assure the fluidity of traffic inside the Union. These are, obviously, just a part of the tasks to be accomplished at the level of the structures placed under the authority of the National Customs Authority.

References will be hereafter made to some aspects of the activity of a regional directorate of excises and customs operations, and we will present some points of view regarding the management of these entities. Because management is an extensive notion, we will stop upon performance management, as part of that of human resources.

2. The management of performance at the level of regional directorates for excises and customs operations and subordinated structures

The statute of member of the European Union has determined, at the level of the National Customs Authority, the adoption of some strategic policies which are to reflect the modifications imposed by the new status. It must be underlined that, given the nature of the service, the personnel involved in this structure is undertaking some specific pressure, temptation and risk. Furthermore, professional performance, honesty and equity must be appreciated, as they are elements which assure the functionality of the system, and are under careful observation by the competent national and European forums.

The notion of performance management is one frequently used in current language, but which has different meanings in the concept of each one of us. We see ourselves obliged to specify the meaning we give to this notion, in the present study. We will look upon performance management as a part and parcel of the management strategy of human resources, a transpose of department strategies to performance objectives, practical and realistic.

Generally, the purpose of performance management is to monitor, reiterate and reregister the performance of staff, in order to allow access to promotion, to help the planning process and to contribute to the improvement of the management process. A quality management of performance is a condition of a successful strategic management. It can therefore be stated that performance management is the most important function of human resource management, as it allows the establishment of a connection between individual purposes and institutional objectives.

An efficient performance management must allow the quantification of personal achievements in an unbiased manner. Such a system must be built with the purpose of providing an unbiased and correct analysis from those competent and, at the same time, to encourage constructive feedback from those evaluated.

Several components of the system are identified as follows:

- Performance planning.
- A competence-based approach.

- Forming the evaluation collective.
- Providing a permanent feedback.

Performance planning implies the adoption of measures which are to assure an evaluation as correct as can be. Therefore, there is imposed the establishment of performance objectives, adapted to the purposes attributed to each post. It must thus be analyzed whether the employee is able to fulfill the tasks attributed, and afterwards the way he/she has fulfilled them.

The approach based on competences implies firstly the separation of basic competences from functional ones. The purpose of this approach is, on one hand, that of establishing the competences required for occupying a certain position, and, on the other hand, that of analyzing the means by which the tasks have been accomplished, for instance the time necessary for the fulfillment of certain tasks, the quality of their fulfillment etc. These are quantifiable elements, which can contribute to the hierarchy of those evaluated. In other words, the stress is placed not on that which is done, but on how it is done. We can thus compare activities which differ in content, and it is contributed to the identification of common quantification elements.

The evaluation collective is to be formed out of high moral profile, with superior authority, hierarchical and professional position to those evaluated, in order to avoid, among others, the creation of an atmosphere which can bring doubt upon the competence and morality of the evaluators.

The assurance of feedback is crucial in performance management. The customs system is in a continuous and dynamic change, both because of modifications generated by the process of European integration, and because of the diversification of the tasks attributed to it. This is why performance standards undergo faster changes than other domains. To apply the same standards on a long term means to deviate from specific realities of each post. It thus becomes impossible to maintain pace with the dynamic of the employees' actions without being in constant contact with them. The feedback function must be assured the more it is indicated that the functions of performance evaluation not be accomplished by personnel immediately superior to that being evaluated.

The application of performance management at the level of units subordinate to the National Customs Authority implies extent knowledge of the system, of specific activities and of employee psychology. The entire system has confronted and confronts the lack of trust from the population regarding the integrity of employed personnel. An exhaustive research on this phenomenon has not been conducted, and the image created is more the result of public exposal than that of a reality. Any institution with broad visibility is undergoing criticism on a larger scale. It is actually a reality which the employees of the customs system and not only them alone, must accept. Furthermore, individual performance which is not the subject of publicity must be pointed out and recompensed in different ways within the system. Some specific elements are thus identified for each component of performance management in the customs system. In the present study, we have looked upon the case *Regional directorates and subordinate entities*, because at this level there meet in a greater measure basic components as well as functional components of competence.

Regarding performance planning, the specific objectives of these entities must be enumerated. Not all of them will be presented, but some of them will be noted:

- Pursuing and collecting of customs taxes
- Pursuing and collecting excises
- Oversight of product producing firms subject to excising
- The assurance of customs control for import products
- The assurance of fluidization of customs traffic, for wares originating from the European Union, as well as for those originating from outside the E.U.
- The cooperation with the institutions implicated in the supervising and diminishment of forbidden product traffic
- The supervising of product transit and hazardous waste etc.

For each of these activities, as well as for each of those not enumerated, it is imposed the establishment of performance indexes, to measure not necessarily the quantity, but the way in which each employee conducts his/her activity. A conclusive example of this approach is that that a higher level of penalties applied as a result of discovering of illegal activities does not necessarily mean a more efficient activity. On the contrary, a more reduced level can mean a better efficiency of the actions of preventing. Another example: a customs agent who does not register confiscation of wares can be corrupt, or, on the contrary, extremely fair, and therefore avoided by potential felons. In other fields, the hierarchy of performance can be simpler: for example, the productive fields, where, in most cases, performance is measured by directly observing quantity and quality of the products realized by each employee. Therefore, an efficient management of a performance management system differs from one field to another, and is far more complex in the customs system.

The establishment of competence is another element of elevated complexity. A customs agent must possess, even if only intuitively, knowledge regarding psychology and human behavior. These are already elements which can make the difference: those who cannot fulfill their job tasks, those who fulfill them consequentially, and those born for the job they have chosen.

Furthermore, as a consequence to the complexity and diversity of activities which can be tasks of customs agents, the members of evaluation teams must rather be perfectly acquainted to the system than to the personnel to be performance-analyzed. The idea stated earlier is withheld, according to which these evaluations must be made by personnel who is not immediately superior to that evaluated.

In conclusion, it can be stated that a strategic management at the level of the National Customs Authority cannot be successful without the adoption of a performance management system applied at the level of subordinate entities, system for which it is compulsory to adapt to specific factors. Such a system also creates the premises to access to promotions attributed to each employee, the position corresponding to the training, participation and er individual performance.

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